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ABSTRACT

A close reading of "Improvisations for the Theater" and "I and Thou" will show that there is a common ground linking the games theory of Viola Spolin and the philosophy and religious teachings of Martin Buber. Relation, to Buber, is the direct and immediate response where two people share mutually with one another. It is this kind of interaction that is sought in the use of theater games where players are urged to act in relation to what the others are creating. The resulting improvisations become, in time, a spontaneous kind of ensemble acting wherein each is part of the whole, a unity. The philosophy of Buber and the games theory of Spolin combine to aid not only the teaching of acting but the teaching of all subjects through the technique of self-discovery. (RB)

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The I and Thou in Theater Games

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The I and Thou in Theater Games

He thought he kept the universe alone,
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree hidden cliff across the lake.
Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter love, original response....

Robert Frost
"The Most of It"

As early as 1924 in the Recreational Training Center of Chicago's Hull House, Neva L. Boyd and Viola Spolin were conducting game sessions with their young charges. On the quite valid theory that all art is play, they developed a cumulative series of ever more challenging games, which actually encouraged spontaneity, cultivated intuitive response, and fostered creativity in the players. It was soon but a short step to the application of this games theory to groups of actors developing the art of improvisational theater.

Through games the actor comes to realize that creativity implies a transformation, that improvisation is truly a "meeting and acting on the ever-changing present." When the games player directs all his action to his fellow players, there occurs a spontaneous meeting, an "original response" which is neither pretense, imitation, nor pantomime, but a mystery something akin to the "artless art" of Professor Eugen Herrigel in his pursuit of the Japanese art of archery. When the player is content to "go with it" without conscious preplanning, to let things happen, to act intuitively rather than intellectually, only then does he open the gates of creativity, for art loves chance and chance loves art.

Even though it seems but a short step from the original games of the Hull House children to their application in the improvizational theater, it may seem to many a huge leap into the void to link the games theory with the philosophy and religious teaching of Martin Buber. But a close reader of Viola Spolin's Improvisations for the Theater and Martin Buber's I and Thou will find that there is here indeed a common ground. In fact Buber has much to say to the actor about what actually goes on in the theater, and he may reveal in philosophic terms that peculiar magic or divine chemistry involved in inspired creativity.

We are here using the term acting in its best and highest sense of the true intuitive response, free from any artificial contrivance, posturing, or pretense; we refer not to a craft or technique or profession but to a creative process. To those who may feel it presumptuous to say that such a spiritual breakthrough as acting is a religious experience, may we merely point out the origins of drama itself. In all ages of mankind, theater has grown out of religion and the ritual of worship. In the primal state then, when the actor originally performed in a religious rite, he could freely accept the divine inspiration as his reward. Buber points out to the modern actor that his way to inspiration lies through relation.

Relation to Buber is the direct and immediate response where two people stand in mutual sharing with one another. It is threefold: I can relate to another person in this way, or to nature, or ultimately to God. Relation is to Buber a generous, open giving, intuitive and free, without intellectual or scientific analysis. Once I use rational categories or systematize, I transform my Thou into It, a material object, no longer a vessel of pure spiritual essence. Relation is generosity, a sharing, a mutual giving; the I-Thou relation is a spiritual connection, never a mere intellectual response but akin to the "original response" of Robert Frost.

It is exactly this kind of an I-Thou relationship that is sought for in the use of theater games. Players are urged by the side-coaching to "help your partner," "share your voice," "keep in contact with one another," " keep the activity going between you," "keep relationship to the other player," "share the stage picture," "communicate," and "contact." In the group problem solving, no one does a solo performance; each is coached to act in relation to what the others are creating.

One can readily see that the resulting improvisations become in time a spontaneous kind of ensemble acting wherein each is part of the whole, the unity. The games theory with the I-Thou relationship it reveals, exposes the ultimate fallacy of the star system in the modern theater. The true actor does not act for self-aggrandisement or acclaim. "You were great" should be the worst insult he could hear after

his performance. Praise instead should go to his support of the entire company working together. "You related beautifully" would constitute his highest praise.

Moreover, agreeing with Buber's concept that intuitive response is objectified when the intellect takes over, the games theory urges its players to avoid playwriting or preplanning but to let themselves go with the activity until the Where (setting) and the What (activity) carry them through the How (plot or action). On the other hand, preplanning the How kills spontineity.

The next vital concept we will consider is one which Buber stresses in his I and Thou when he insists that relation exists only at the present moment. "The present arises only in virtue of the fact that the Thou becomes present." (I and Thou, p. 12), and he continues: "True beings are lived in the present; the life of objects is in the past" (p. 13). He even goes so far later in his tretise (p. 79) to refer to God as "the wholly Present." Therefore we can conclude that a true I-Thou relationship on all three levels (with beings, with nature, and with God) exists only now. When it is recalled as a past event, it becomes an I-It object.

The present moment is also fundamental to the theater games of Viola Spolin. Indeed, she stresses "the moment of process, the moment of living theater" (Improvisations, p. 19) and goes on to insist that "Only from meeting and acting upon the changing, moving present can improvisation be born."

This is why side coaching by the teacher-director is so important during theater games; "it keeps [the student] in the present time, in the time of process" (p. 29).

Carrying the concept one step further, one can see that all drama takes place now. If the mysterious connection of the inspired actor occurs only in the present moment, so also does any action in all dramatic literature. Whether one sees a play performed, or reading it, sees it on the stage of the mind, it never slips into the past tense.

Refer to Professor Strunk's Elements of Style to confirm that all summaries of plays must be written in the present tense with antecedent action in the present perfect. (Not realizing that Friar Lawrence's letter has failed to reach Romeo, Juliet drinks the potion.) He reminds his Cornell students in "the little book" that fiction or poetry may be summarized in the past but that plays are immediate and present. Any stage directions from any play prove his point; consider the following from Pirandello's To Clothe the Naked:

> She runs to open a window. Ludovico and Ersilia run to the other. When they open them, the noise becomes an uproar that fills the room. There has been a collision and one of the vehicles has pinned an old man against the wall of the house. The old man, either dead or dying, is surrounded by a shouting crowd, some of whom are trying to free him and get him to the hospital.

If this action took place in a piece of fiction, it would slip into the past, viz: She ran to open a window. Ludovico and Ersilia ran to the other. When they opened them, the noise became an uproar that filled the room. There had been a collision and one of the vehicles had pinned an old man against the wall of the house. The old man, either dead or dying, was surrounded by a shouting crowd, some of whom were trying to free him and get him to a hospital.

Here clearly we read fiction, a past tale retold. Yet every time a play is performed or read, the action is present and now (see Boleslavsky: "all nights are opening nights." p. 99).

The next point where Buber and Spolin meet in concert is in the concept of loss of self through art. Buber makes a clear differentiation between a person and an individual, between the free man and the self-willed man (p. 68). The former becomes conscious of himself through "sharing in being"; the latter exists "mostly in the fiction of its special being which it has made for itself" (p.64). The individual, hemmed and hedged around by custom, has a "face" he puts on for the world and asks his mirror to reflect. Theater games of course give this individual an invitation to step out of the thralldom of self; they invite the individual to become a true person. For acting which is sharing and giving implies something spiritual. It is never a mere release from tension; this self-expression only makes an It out of a Thou experience,

or at least allows the potential person to remain merely an individual with self-willed needs. But the true person finds that acting implies freedom from the I; it is "the simple confrontation of being with being" (p. 92).

Theater games then, lead to the step out of the It and into the Thou relationship. Spolin tells us that through games the "side coaching gives the student actor his self-identity [Buber's person] because it keeps him from wandering off into isolation within his subjective [Buber's individual] world" (p. 29). As Buber says (p. 82), "Creation happens to us, recasts us in burning--we tremble and are faint. We submit. We take part in creation, meet the Creator, reach out to Him, helpers and companions."

Finally we see that Buber and Spolin come together to aid us not only in the teaching of acting but also in all teaching. They both lead us back to the original derivation of the word educate: e-ducere, to lead forth, for they both show us clearly that no new awakening is ever taught; it must be discovered by the learner himself. The teacher cannot transmit a secondhand experience; he can only lead the learner to the brink of discovery.

Buber shows that like salvation, all of life's mysteries must be met in individual confrontation. Indeed he tells us that Buddha "is one of those who have known this. Like all true teachers, he does not wish to impart an opinion, but to teach the way" (p. 91). Buber is also most specific in detailing the relationship of the genuine educator to his pupil, and even sees in the Socratic dialogues an illustration of

pure relation (p. 66). But he warns us that the educator or the doctor enters into a relationship with the pupil or the patient wherein the mutuality of relation is incomplete (He must practice the realization Buber calls inclusion: Umfassung.), for "Healing, like educating, is only possible to the one who lives over against the other, and yet is detatched" (p.133).

Spolin would agree with this description of the role of teacher. Her instructions to the teacher-director admonish him to maintain this detatchment in all the game relationships. She warns him (p. 43) to "retreat from imposing the teacher's authority. When students feel they 'did it themselves,' the teacher has succeeded in his role." If he keeps the atmosphere of the workship "joyous and free of authoritarianism" everyone will "play" and any techniques for teaching will appear as if by accident (p. 19). Furthermore Spolin counsels, "Do not be impatient. Don't take over" (p. 41) and "Do not tell students why they are given a problem." (p. 31). Obviously, when told the purpose of a game, the student will try to give the teacher what he feels the teacher wants. But the teacher-pupil relationship is ever a delicate balance; she cautions wisely "not to detach ourselves in such a way that the student feels lost." (p. 8).

In final agreement with Buber that learning must be accomplished through personal discovery, she writes, "Remember that a lecture will never accomplish what an experience will for student actors." Paradoxically she instructs her student

directors "Do not teach." Rather they should "Expose students to the theatrical environment, and they will find their own way " (p.42).

Buber and Spolin come together in complete agreement then on four main points: the nature of relation or sensitivity to others the "original response" , the necessity of acting in the present moment, the loss of self through art to become a true person, and the basic philosophy of education that all learning is discovery. Buber of course wrote for all men, not necessarily the actor, while Spolin set about in a practical way to organize a system of games specifically for leading the actor out of the individual self. In "The Most of It," Robert Frost cries out for an "original response" from nature. The actor shares the "original response" with other men. Theater games are a guide through the labyrinth of self to the "original response."

Returning finally to Spolin's premise that all art is play, (we revel in the knowledge that one still plays a musical instrument and that all works of drama are plays.) we can see from Buber's philosophy that once art ceases to be play it becomes an object, an It, no longer a pure I-Thou experience. The playing of theater games then is an experience in creativity to every man who "rather means by 'God' as I do, Him who--whatever else He may be--enters into direct relation with us men in creative, revealing and redeeming acts, and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relation with Him" (Buber, p. 135).

And now if we may refer to Buber just one more time, this quotation seems most apt in the now of the living present: fom I and Thou, Part II, page 48. "Speechmaker, you speak too late." Thank you.

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